SISYPHUS

Are some people better than others at thinking about what course of action to follow? Sisyphus certainly assumes so. He stayed behind in Pharsalus a day longer than expected in order to meet with the governing authorities to help them in their deliberations. But Socrates is puzzled about what deliberation can really be, and he wonders how it differs from mere guesswork. By the end of the dialogue, it becomes clear that Sisyphus does not know the first thing about deliberating, and Socrates offers to delve into it again with him.

Sisyphus thinks that deliberating is trying to find out the best course of action. But Socrates argues that this cannot be right—if you are in a position to deliberate about something, you must already understand that subject, and if you understand it, you won't try to find it out; unlike inquiry, which presupposes ignorance, meaningful deliberation presupposes knowledge. Since the objects of deliberation are in the future and not yet in determinate existence, deliberation risks being a shot in the dark unless it is aimed at something definite. What target should it be aimed at? What kind of knowledge is presupposed? The dialogue does not tell us, but surely its author (probably a follower of Plato writing in mid-fourth-century B.C.*) means to encourage his readers toward Platonic philosophy and its central target—Goodness itself. At roughly the same time, in his* Protrepticus, *or* Exhortation to Philosophy *(a work surviving only in fragments), Aristotle was also arguing that political judgment needs a foundation in speculative philosophy (B46–51).*

Aristotle investigated the concept of deliberation in his lectures on ethics, where several passages indicate that this topic had been discussed in Plato's Academy, apparently in much the same terms as in Sisyphus. *Of Plato's own works, the most relevant are* Meno, *which raises the paradox that one cannot try to find out either what one knows or what one doesn't know (80d–e), and* Euthydemus, *which mentions two related paradoxes in the course of illustrating the difference between mere logic-chopping and real philosophy (275e–277c).*

We find in Sisyphus *certain notable anachronisms which place it firmly in the fourth century* B.C.*—not the fifth, when Socrates actually lived. Sisyphus of Pharsalus in Thessaly was a contemporary of Plato, not of Socrates, and played a prominent role in local affairs. Stratonicus of Athens, whom the author gratuitously mentions at the beginning of the dialogue, was a renowned performing musician and teacher of the first third of the fourth century, whom Socrates could scarcely have known. And when Socrates asks, "Where is Callistratus?" (388c), he seems to refer to Callistratus of Aphidna, a prominent Athenian*

politician who was on the run from a death sentence for several years after 362. So the author must have intended his dialogue to resonate with a contemporary mid-fourth-century audience. Plato's Meno *suggests by certain biographical details that it is directed against the rival educational philosophy offered by Isocrates in Athens, and the same may well be true of* Sisyphus. *Isocrates undertook to make his students good at deliberating, without taking what he regarded as the useless detour of Platonic philosophy, and held that "likely opinion about useful things is far better than exact knowledge of useless things" (*Helen *5). Isocrates also declared, "I regard a man as wise whose opinions enable him to hit upon the best course in most cases" (*Antidosis *271), a conception of wise deliberation that is called into question in* Sisyphus.

D.S.H.

387b SOCRATES: We waited a long time for you yesterday as well, Sisyphus, before Stratonicus' show, so that you could join us in hearing a real master giving a performance full of splendid material, both in theory and in practice; but after we gave up thinking you were coming, we went to hear the man by ourselves.

SISYPHUS: Yes, that's absolutely right—some business arose, you see, c which was fairly urgent, so I couldn't ignore it. Our authorities were in conference yesterday, so they required me to join their deliberations; and if the authorities summon any of us to join their deliberations, we citizens of Pharsalus are legally bound to comply.

SOCRATES: Well, it's a splendid thing to obey the law, and also to be considered a good deliberator by one's fellow citizens—as you yourself are considered to be one of the good deliberators in Pharsalus. Still, I'm not in a position to take issue with you about good deliberation, Sisyphus, d at the moment; that, I think, would call for a lot of leisure and a long argument—but I'd like to propose a discussion with you about deliberation itself, first of all, about what it is.

What could deliberation itself be? Could you tell me that?—not how to do it well or badly or splendidly, but just what sort of thing deliberation itself is? Surely you could do that quite easily, being such a good deliberator yourself? I hope I'm not being too inquisitive by questioning you on the subject.

SISYPHUS: Can it really be that you don't know what deliberation is?

e SOCRATES: Indeed I don't, Sisyphus, at least if it differs at all from what's done by a man who lacks understanding on some matter calling for action, guessing his answer by divining or making it up: he says whatever comes

Translated by David Gallop.

into his head, just like people who play odds-and-evens; they have no idea, of course, whether they're holding an even or an odd number of things in their hands, yet when they say which it is, they hit upon the truth. Perhaps deliberation is also something like that: someone who has 388
no understanding of what he's deliberating about is just lucky in what he says, and hits upon the truth. If it's something like that, then I do know roughly what deliberation is; but if it's not like that, then I don't understand it at all.

SISYPHUS: But surely, it's not like being utterly and completely ignorant of some matter, but like being familiar with part of it, while not yet understanding the rest.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you mean that deliberation is—Heaven help me! I b
feel as if I'm almost divining your view about good deliberation—do you mean it's something like this? Someone is trying to find out what would be the best course of action to take, and doesn't yet clearly understand it, but is rather in the process of thought, as it were? Is that more or less what you mean?

SISYPHUS: Yes, it is.

SOCRATES: Which do people try to find out—matters which they know, or ones which they don't know?

SISYPHUS: Both.

SOCRATES: When you say that people try to find out both—things they do know as well as things they don't—perhaps you mean something like c
this: one might, for example, be acquainted with Callistratus—know who he was—yet not know where he was to be found.[1] Is that what you mean by trying to find out both?

SISYPHUS: Yes, it is.

SOCRATES: Now you wouldn't try to find out the former, knowing Callistratus, at least if you knew him?

SISYPHUS: Of course not.

SOCRATES: But you might try to find out where he was. d

SISYPHUS: Yes, I think you might.

SOCRATES: Nor, again, would you try to discover where the man was to be found, if you knew that; in that case, you would go and find him right away, wouldn't you?

SISYPHUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Apparently, then, it isn't things which people know that they try to find out, but things they don't know.

But that argument may strike you as captious, Sisyphus, put forward not with a view to the truth of the matter, but merely as a debating point. If so, look at it this way, and see if you agree with what was just said. e
You know, don't you, what happens in geometry: the diagonal is unknown to geometers, yet there's no question whether it is or is not a diagonal—that's not what they're trying to find out at all—but rather, how long it

1. Accepting the deletion of *ouch hostis eiē ho Kallistratos* in c6.

is in relation to the sides of the areas it bisects. Isn't *that* what they're trying to find out about the diagonal?

SISYPHUS: I believe so.

SOCRATES: And that *is* something unknown, isn't it?

SISYPHUS: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: Or again, take the doubling of the cube. You know, don't you, that geometers try to find out, by reasoning, how big it is? As for the cube itself, they don't try to find out whether it's a cube or not. That much they know, don't they?

SISYPHUS: Yes.

389 SOCRATES: Or again, consider the upper air. You surely know that what Anaxagoras and Empedocles and all the rest of the cosmologists are trying to find out is whether it's infinite or finite.

SISYPHUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But they don't ask whether it is air, do they now?

SISYPHUS: Of course not.

SOCRATES: In all such cases, then, our conclusion is as follows: nobody can ever try to find out anything that he knows, only what he doesn't know. Would you agree with me about that?

SISYPHUS: I would.

b SOCRATES: Now isn't this what deliberation seemed to us to be—somebody trying to find out the best course to follow in matters requiring him to take action?

SISYPHUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And we thought that deliberation was trying to find out something concerning practical matters, didn't we?

SISYPHUS: Yes, of course.

SOCRATES: So now it's time for us to consider what it is that prevents people from finding out what they're trying to find out.

SISYPHUS: I think it is.

c SOCRATES: And what should we say it is that prevents them, if not incomprehension?

SISYPHUS: Let's look into it, for Heaven's sake.

SOCRATES: Absolutely!—we must let out every reef, as they say, and raise full cry.

So now let's examine the following question together: do you think it's possible for a man to deliberate about music if he has no knowledge of music, and knows neither how to play the cithara nor how to perform any other kind of music?

SISYPHUS: No, I don't.

d SOCRATES: And what about military or nautical expertise? Would someone who knew neither of those subjects be able to deliberate at all about what he should do in either field? Would he be able to deliberate about how to command a force or captain a vessel if he lacked all knowledge of military or nautical matters?

SISYPHUS: No.

SOCRATES: And would you expect the same to hold in all other fields? It is quite impossible for someone who doesn't understand something either to know or to deliberate about what he doesn't understand.

SISYPHUS: I agree.

SOCRATES: But it *is* possible to try to find out what one doesn't know; isn't that right?

SISYPHUS: Certainly. e

SOCRATES: Then trying to find out can no longer be identified with deliberating.

SISYPHUS: Why not?

SOCRATES: Because what one tries to find out is evidently something one doesn't know, whereas apparently no human being can deliberate about what he doesn't know. Wasn't that what we just said?

SISYPHUS: It certainly was.

SOCRATES: And isn't that what you Pharsalians were doing yesterday, trying to find out the best things for your city to do, yet not knowing them? Because if you knew them, you surely wouldn't still have been trying to find them out—just as we don't try to find out anything else we already know, do we?

SISYPHUS: No, we don't.

SOCRATES: And if one doesn't know something, Sisyphus, which do you think one should do: try to find it out or learn it?

SISYPHUS: Learn it, for Heaven's sake; that's what *I* think. 390

SOCRATES: And there you're right. But tell me, is it for the following reason that you think one should learn it rather than try to find it out? One can discover it more quickly and easily by learning it from those who understand it, than by trying to find it out on one's own, when one doesn't know it. Or is there some other reason?

SISYPHUS: No, that is the reason.

SOCRATES: Well then, why did you people take the trouble to deliberate yesterday on matters you don't understand, and try to find out the best course of action for the city to take? Why weren't you learning those things, rather, from someone who understands them, so that you could take the b best course of action for the city? Instead, it seems to me that you spent the whole day yesterday sitting there, making things up and divining about matters you didn't understand, instead of taking the trouble to learn them—I mean those who govern your city, including you.

Perhaps you'll say that I've been jesting at your expense merely for the sake of having a discussion, but that you think nothing has been seriously c proved. Yet you'll certainly have to take this next point seriously, Sisyphus. Suppose it be granted that there is such a thing as deliberation; suppose it does not, as was discovered just now, prove identical with sheer incomprehension,[2] guesswork, or making things up, no different, but just using a grander name for it. In that case, don't you think there's a difference

2. Accepting the conjecture *anepistēmosunē* in c4.

between some people and others with respect to deliberating well or being good deliberators, just as some people differ from others in all other areas of expertise—as, for example, some carpenters differ from others, or some
d doctors from others, or some pipers from others, or as tradesmen in general differ from one another?[3] Just as those experts differ in their respective skills, don't you think the same applies to deliberating—that there's a difference between some people and others?

SISYPHUS: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: Now tell me, don't all those who deliberate either well or badly deliberate about things that are going to exist in the future?

SISYPHUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And what's in the future doesn't exist yet. Isn't that right?

SISYPHUS: Of course.

e SOCRATES: Because otherwise, presumably, it wouldn't *still* be going to exist in the future, but would exist already, wouldn't it?

SISYPHUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if it doesn't exist yet, it hasn't yet[4] come into being either.

SISYPHUS: No, it hasn't.

SOCRATES: But if it hasn't even yet come into being, then it doesn't yet possess any nature of its own either, does it?

SISYPHUS: None at all.

SOCRATES: Then those who deliberate well and those who do it badly are all deliberating about matters that neither exist nor have come into being nor possess any nature, whenever they deliberate about what's in the future. Isn't that right?

SISYPHUS: It does appear to be.

SOCRATES: Now do you think it's possible for anyone to hit upon the nonexistent either well or badly?

SISYPHUS: What do you mean by that?

SOCRATES: I'll show you what I'm suggesting. Consider a number of
391 archers. How would you distinguish which of them was a good marksman and which was a poor one? That's not hard to tell, is it? You would presumably ask them to aim at some target.

SISYPHUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And the one who most often succeeded in hitting the target you would judge the winner?

SISYPHUS: I would.

SOCRATES: But if there were no target set up for them to aim at, and each
b just shot wherever he pleased, how could you distinguish between the good marksman and the poor one?

SISYPHUS: I couldn't.

3. Placing a question-mark after *diapherousin* in 390d2, and a comma after *technais* in d3.

4. Conjecturing *oupō* for *houtōs* in e2.

SOCRATES: And wouldn't you also be at a loss to distinguish good deliberators from bad ones, if they didn't understand what they were deliberating about?

SISYPHUS: I would.

SOCRATES: And if those who deliberate are deliberating about matters in the future, they're deliberating about matters that don't exist, aren't they?

SISYPHUS: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: And it's impossible, isn't it, for anyone to hit upon the nonexistent. How do you think anyone could ever hit upon what doesn't exist? c

SISYPHUS: It can't be done.

SOCRATES: And since it's impossible to hit upon the nonexistent, no one who's deliberating about the nonexistent could actually hit upon it. For the future is something that doesn't exist, isn't it?

SISYPHUS: So I believe.

SOCRATES: Then since nobody can hit upon what's in the future, no human being can actually be good or bad at deliberation.

SISYPHUS: Apparently not.

SOCRATES: Nor can one person be either a better or a worse deliberator than another, if one cannot, in fact, be more or less successful at hitting upon the nonexistent.

SISYPHUS: Indeed not. d

SOCRATES: So what standard could people possibly have in mind when they call certain people good or bad deliberators? Don't you think, Sisyphus, that it would be worth delving into this again some time?